

Montana Woman

Pioneering Into The Future



Montana Highway Patrol Trooper
CHERIE LOFTON

JUNE 2009
Complimentary

Just Stoppin' By - R. Thomas Funk
Simple Reflections - Pam Martin

MONTANA WOMAN

SMALL WOMAN, BIG HAT Montana Highway Patrol Trooper, CHERIE LOFTON

by Jenna Caplette
photos by Stephen Scott



Officer Lofton demonstrating hand-cuffing.

Beneath her flat-brimmed uniform hat, Montana Highway Patrol Trooper Cherie Lofton looks like an abbreviated version of her already petite self—and young, maybe 20 years old instead of 32—so one might easily underestimate her ability as a law enforcement professional.

One of just 12 female troopers statewide who work for MHP, Lofton has a career that she can't leave behind at the end of a shift. Just the same, she loves her work, enjoys never knowing how any one shift will unfold. Because she works in the area north of Yellowstone National Park, while on traffic duty she might check on buffalo on Highway 89 in Paradise Valley in the morning and investigate a fatal crash that afternoon.

On July 3rd last year, I rode along with Lofton. Driving south on Highway 89 in Paradise Valley on that blistering-hot summer day, a call came in alerting her to a one-vehicle crash on the I-90 overpass in Livingston.

Lofton U-turned her patrol car, punched the accelerator, the car's siren screaming. Many RVs and cars stayed their course rather than pulling over as we zig-zagged in and out of their lane to pass. I'd never considered how truly risky high-speed responses to an emergency call can be and sent silent kudos to the few drivers who did pull over.

At the site of the crash, I leaned up against the freeway guardrail to watch, relieved to have arrived safely. The area was busy with responders. Two ambulances waited to carry victims to the Livingston hospital. A witness walked the scene cradling the victims' dog

in her arms. Law enforcement helped route freeway traffic around the crash site.

Lofton opened the patrol car trunk to bring out her equipment, preparing to map the scene. She worked in the glaring sun, shaded by her hat, but baking in the wool pants that are MHP standard-issue. She measured and marked distances between spots on the pavement that indicated how this particular incident played out, spots mostly invisible to an untrained eye. As I leaned up against a guardrail watching, a member of the Livingston Police Department passed and told me, "She's one of the best."

I heard the same comment the next day at a Safety Check staffed by MHP and the Gallatin County Sheriff's Department, where Lofton was the only woman on a team of men.

"People wonder if guys will be overprotective of women on the force and compromise their own safety. It's true they're a little protective," Lofton said. "They're not concerned about my ability to do the job, though. If they were, it would be uncomfortable."

Drivers she has ticketed on traffic stops have said, "You're so small. You don't work by yourself or have to work nights, do you?" She smiled, explained, "Ninety percent of this job is the brain and communication. Being competent in it has more to do with personality and how you deal with things."

Lofton looks and acts competent. "Your safety relies on tracking what is going on in the car you've stopped and at the same time you've got to stay aware of people going by. Often they don't slow down, don't pay attention," she continued. "Sometimes a second car pulls up—maybe the two cars are traveling together—but you don't know it's not a trap, that they're concealing a crime."

Lofton has "drawn down" on suspects—pulled out her gun and pointed it at them—but the only time she herself has been physically assaulted was during the four years she worked at the Gallatin County Detention Center. She laughed, "My job on the road is safer than working in that jail was. At least now I have the equipment to defend myself."

While working for MHP she carries a gun, pepper spray and a baton. "In a jail setting the only self-defense item that we carry is pepper spray," she explained. "So it's not so much that

I didn't have equipment to defend myself within the jail, as much as I have more options on the street."

And, yes, men Lofton has arrested have "hit" on her, asking her on dates even while cuffed and sequestered in the back seat of her patrol car. She says that happens just as often to men in law enforcement.

Lofton studies materials on how to mentally prepare for a deadly force encounter. She wears a First Choice Armor bullet-proof vest while on duty. When she became a trooper she promised her parents she

would wear one. Every day on the job she also consciously confirms her choice to survive, affirms her plan "not to die" on that particular shift.

Dealing with Alcohol

A 2008 recipient of a Swimming Upstream Award—awards given for community members working to change how Gallatin County "shows up" around alcohol misuse—Lofton pioneered the placement of DUI-prevention signs at county river take-outs—the first of their kind in Montana. She participates as a member of the Gallatin County DUI Task Force and has helped start a Task Force in Park County.

Lofton has worked fatal DUI crashes,



Lofton, keeping her equipment in tip top order.



Officer Lofton administering a breathalyzer test.

"When you want to keep drunk drivers off the roads, you patrol areas where there are likely to be a lot of drunk drivers. And you patrol those roads at times when you are most likely to encounter them."

In 2004 Lofton did her basic training for the Montana Highway Patrol. In 2006 she returned to the Montana Law Enforcement Academy to take a two week technical level course, two weeks of reconstruction training, and a class on using the Total Station Forensic Mapping System. "Sometimes at a scene everyone is dead, there are no witnesses, so we have to figure out what happened," she said.

"You can figure things like speed at impact by using calculations from trigonometry, calculus, and physics. I have reference books I can use with exact formulas for calculations."

When confronted with a particularly gruesome crash site, her training helps insulate her from what she sees. "When you look at a crash scientifically, you don't let yourself get caught up in questions like whether someone involved saw it coming. You focus on the technical stuff, switch gears."

MHP's force of 225 troopers is responsible for enforcement on Montana's roadways, but troopers also back up the local police department, and police departments do the same for MHP.

Lofton worked as part of a team of forensic mapping specialists who assisted the Gallatin County Sheriff's Office with the Jason Wright homicide scene in Bozeman in June 2006, a task that took nine hours. Other than when she is tied to a desk writing incident reports, or in her car patrolling, she often works outside. An outdoor enthusiast, time outside is one of the perks of her job. She helped map the 2007 Mercy Flight plane crash, a scene a mile long, with wreckage strewn across a rocky, tree-covered hillside in the Horseshoe Hills, north of Belgrade. "It was dark by the time we were done. The batteries on our flashlights had all gone dead. They had to shoot off flares to get us off the hillside," she said. It was the first forensic mapping of a plane crash in Montana.

Lofton routinely interviews witnesses and victims of the crashes she investigates. If victims are taken to the hospital, once she's mapped a scene she will go there to talk with them. "The

with survivors. She has had family members of victims call a year later, finally ready to hear the details of the crash that killed their loved one.

Life without a Bullet-Proof Vest

In March of 2008, Lofton helped provide security for the Democratic Governor's Conference held in Big Sky. She's scheduled to do that again this year. MHP provides protection for Montana's governor and visiting dignitaries. A few troopers work this detail exclusively and are stationed in Helena, while local troopers work it more occasionally. At the conference, some governors bring their own security, but MHP still assigns a trooper to each governor. In 2008, Lofton was the only woman chosen.

She has often worked executive duty for Governor Schweitzer, chauffeuring him from event to event while he's in Gallatin or Park County, the counties MHP's District 7 troopers work. "In academy, we learned specialized driving, turns and maneuvers to avoid things. A trained driver is more likely to be able to maneuver out of an attack situation," she explained. Dressed in her own clothes for this detail, people have assumed her to be an aide to the governor, even his daughter. Asked about executive duty, Lofton replied, "It's a nice change of pace."

Lofton says her mother, a fifth generation Montanan, grew up in Arizona and Missouri and has been back in Montana eight years. She missed the mountains and living in a small ranching community. As a history major, a connection to her heritage matters to her.

An intriguing juxtaposition between law enforcement and "traditional roles" for women is apparent when Lofton does laundry. Pulling wet clothes out of the washer, she sometimes finds bullets rolling around in the bottom of the machine. When not corseted by the familiar weight of her bullet-proof vest, she feels like something is wrong, missing. She often exits her Nissan pickup and other cars in the precise

sequence of moves she was trained to use on the job. Laundry fresheners like Febreze® serve



Cherie riding with friends.



Catching some R&R in a local stream.

hardest part is dealing with families. They're upset. They want answers. You might be at the hospital and have a good idea of whether their loved one will make it or not. Sometimes you identify with them because you have similar interests or have met them in the past," she said.

With a crash that results in fatalities, Lofton's investigative work includes piecing together the last 24 hours of victims' lives, requiring personal interviews with everyone the victim interacted with on the fatal day. It's an intimate and emotionally-challenging window into family dynamics and interpersonal relationships, one that can create unusual ties



Cherie in an off duty moment.

a very particular purpose: "When I get in my patrol car the morning after arresting a drunk driver, the car can smell like a stale drunk, like alcohol. Sometimes I need to clear out the smell of someone I've arrested."

Lofton works job fairs to encourage women to make the same career choice she has. It seems there's a stereotype about the kind of women attracted to law enforcement work, perhaps brash or hard-muscled. Lofton doesn't fit the stereotype and wants women to see it. When in uniform, she hears little girls ask their mothers, "Mom, can women be police?"

They can. And are. *mw*

Women interested in applying for a job with Montana Highway Patrol can call (877) 8-PATROL, email mhp@mt.gov, go to their local job service, or visit the website: <http://doj.mt.gov/enforcement/highwaypatrol/default.asp>

Cover Story Contributor



Jenna Caplette is a freelance writer in Bozeman and Coordinator for the Gallatin County DUI Task Force. This article ran in Bozeman's *Balance Magazine* in September 2008.

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My Thoughts PREDATOR

by Ja'Nee Newman

When I was nineteen years of age and married for only three months to my high school sweetheart, I was attacked and raped outside of our apartment building. The year was 1971. I don't often speak of the incident, although my thoughts are written in various journals I've kept throughout the years. I knew the time would come when some of those words would be put into print. If you're thinking you'll skip the article because it's TMI (too much information) that is your prerogative.

He walks behind me. He doesn't live here. I'm afraid. His hand is over my mouth and I'm in the Twilight Zone. He says, "Don't move," and I try not to struggle. He says he has a knife. I cry out and his hands go around my neck. I'm down behind the trash bin. "Are you a virgin?" and I tell him yes because I think he'll back off or take it easy. Penetration, and I feel nothing. I think, "Where's his weapon?" and I realize it's buried inside of me. This man accomplishes his goal; he puts fear into me. As he finishes the act, a new Ja'Nee emerges. He says, "Close your eyes and count to 100," and I know this is where he uses the knife. I see my stomach in the moonlight; will my flesh be ripped? Will I bleed to death behind the trash dumpster, along with damp coffee grounds and rotting lettuce leaves? He gets up and leaves my skin in one piece. He takes my purse and scarf as a memento. He takes with him my trust, innocence, pride, and humor.

I pull my jeans up and don't bother to zip them, and go into my empty apartment. My husband was recently drafted into the army and is based in Germany. I cry because I'm angry and shocked this has happened to me. Do I call the police, call my parents, or go upstairs to a neighbor?

I want to soak in a bath and think about what to tell my new husband. I call my parents instead, say I've been raped, and drop

the phone. The police car arrives with lights flashing. Mom comes inside the apartment, but Dad decides to stay outside when I desperately need him with me. At the police station I'm given a report to fill out. My parents traveled in another vehicle and have not yet arrived. A young male officer says, "You were lucky the assailant didn't use your scarf to strangle you." At the Northridge Hospital emergency room, they give me a douche of all things. The nurse advises me to never tell my husband, and says she didn't tell hers. Back at the police station, I look at Polaroid pictures of suspects, and there's one photograph I can't identify 100 percent. In the line-up, I identify the plaid shirt. When I close my eyes, his voice is vaguely familiar, but his facial features, height, and weight elude me. I know he is a young Caucasian man with an out-of-place Afro-American hairstyle. I know I had never seen him in our building or laundry room.

This man, this stranger, has a girlfriend waiting for him at the local park. The officers estimate he robbed me for the suede fringe purse because she coveted it. The rape was something that just came to him. I think he might as well have carved me with a knife. The pain I carry is constant and the scars are real enough. I'm haunted. I have no more trust in men but lots of faith in myself. I want to thank him for introducing me to real fear, and may he burn in hell. I am still a woman. I will always be strong and never be a victim again.

mw

Footnote:

There are wonderful resources available today that will assist a victim of rape. There are compassionate individuals who will hold your hand and tell you it's going to be okay. Believe them and let them walk with you.